6

ANCIENT NECROMANCY AND MODERN SPIRITUALISM

Until now we have discussed the soul and various aspects of the life hereafter, but we have hardly come into contact with the dead themselves. The idea might look strange to some, but the practice of consulting the dead is universal. Even in our own culture there are still people who claim that the dead can give valuable advice to the living, the so-called spiritualists. The ancient Greeks and Romans also tried to establish contact with the dead in order to ask their opinion about pressing problems of the living.' It thus seems a worthwhile enterprise to compare these two approaches to the world of the dead, ancient necromancy and modern spiritualism, in order to bring out more sharply mutual similarities and differences.' The problem has hardly ever been investigated in any depth and my answers are surely only preliminary. We will discuss a number of obvious questions. Were there specific places put aside for approaching the dead? What kinds of person consulted the dead and what were their problems? How were the dead to be approached: did the living have to perform certain rituals or was access to the world of the shades dead easy? And, last but not least, could anybody approach the dead or were certain specialists needed? We will first study the Greek testimony (section 1), then the Roman and Hellenistic evidence (section 2) and conclude with a look at modern practices (section 3).

1. Greek necromancy

The oldest Greek example of necromancy occurs in Book 11 of Homer's *Odyssey*. When Odysseus stays with the goddess Circe, she tells him to go to the underworld to consult the seer Teiresias about his return (10.503–40). In order to reach this goal Odysseus has to travel to the ends of the world. The location is probably an invention of the poet – not least because the ends of the world are not a very specific place. It has therefore persuasively been argued by many critics – from Maximus of Tyre (14.2) and Eustathius (1667.63, 1671.31) to modern scholars – that Homer has reshaped an earlier epic tradition in which the entry to the underworld was located in Thesprotia.'

Homer's test provides a clear indication in favour of this interpretation, since Circe specifies that tlie ends of the world are there 'where the Pyriphlegethon and Cocytus (which is a branch of the Styx) flow into the Acheron. There is a rock and the joining-place of two loud-sounding rivers' (*Od.* 10.513–15). At first sight this looks like an arbitrary, imaginary place, but the second-century traveller Pausanias thought otherwise. In an account of the adventures of Theseus lie mentions that tlie hero was kept prisoner in Tliesprotia in Northern Greece. Here 'near Kicliyros lie an Acherousian lake and a river Acheron, and tlie detestable stream Cocytus. I think Homer must liave seen this region and in his very daring poetry about Hades taken the names of rivers from the rivers in Tliesprotia' (1.17.5, tr. P. Levi).' The connection of Thesprotia with Hades, then, must liave been relatively old, although we know of Theseus' descent into the underworld in Thesprotia only via a rationalised version about his visit to the Molossian (= Tliesprotian) King Aidoneus (= Hades) and his wife Persephone.[5]

In concordance with the instructions of Circe (10.527–9), the necromantic scene seems to be acted out just before the entry to Hades. However, other indications suggest a stay within Hades, such as Elpenor's words that Odysseus will return from Hades (11.69), thus reflecting Homer's somewhat uneasy conibination of a necromancy proper and a descent into tlie undenvorld." To activate the souls of the dead, Odysseus digs a pit with his sword, pours out honey mixed with milk, 'sweet wine' and water, and sprinkles 'white barley-meal' over them. He then promised to sacrifice a bull for the dead and a black sheep for Teiresias on his return to Ithaca. Having thus propitiated the dead, he cut the throat of tlie ram and the black ewe that Circe had provided into tlie pit. When the dark blood flowed into tlie pit, the souls of the dead came up from Hades. Finally, lie told his comrades to skin and burn the victims and to pray to Hades and Persephone (11.23–47). Aeschylus' *Persians*, written in 472 BC, contains another example of a necromantic procedure (598–680).[7] Here Queen Atossa instructs tlie Persian elders to raise Darius from his grave instead of invoking him from the underworld. After she has brought garlands of flowers and the libations of milk, honey, water, unmixed wine and oil (611–18), the elders invoke Earth, Hernies and Hades to send up his soul (629–30). When the king appears, lie mentions the beating of the ground (683) and especially stresses the effect of the 'necromantic cries' (687), in obedience of which he has come up (697), but which he abruptly curtails when he has had enough of it (705).[8]

Parts of these literary descriptions were certainly familiar to an early Greek audience. The dead customarily did not receive the normal Greek drink of wine mixed with water but 'abnormal' drinks, such as milk, water or unmixed wine, just as the Olympian gods as a rule received white, not black, animals." The same divinities found in tlie *Persians* are also invoked in a fairly recently discovered fragment (F 273a Radt) of Aeschylus' *Psychagôgoi* and may have been part of current necromantic rituals. And regarding the beating of the

ground the audience will have remembered that in the Iliad Althaea pounds the earth when calling upon Hades and Persephone (IX.568–70).

Other elements, though, may have looked strange. It has repeatedly been observed that the digging of the pit with a sword, the sacrificing of a black sheep and the sprinkling of groats in the Odyssean ritual closely parallel Hittite purification rituals, in which deities of the underworld, not the dead, are summoned up."[11] Here Oriental influence seems likely and was perhaps meant to contribute to the creation of a frightening atmosphere. Necromancy was widely practised in the ancient Near East and we will meet another example before long (section 2).[11] It remains impossible to know to what extent these sacrifices exactly reflected contemporary necromantic practices, but it surely would be a mistake to think that literature necessarily mirrors reality. In fact, the little we know about contemporary necromancy does not give the impression that Homer and Aeschylus were much concerned with a 'thick description' of this ritual.

In Archaic and Classical Greece various places were known for their oracles of the dead, technically called a *nekyomanteion*, 'the place to consult the dead', or *psychopompeion*, 'the place where the souls are guided'. The most famous was in Thesprotia (below). Others existed in Arcadian Phigaleia (Paus. 3.17.9) and Hermione in the Argolid,[12] in Asia Minor in Heraclea Pontica, which also had a river called Acheron,[13] and in Italian Cumae, which most likely was the setting of Aeschylus' *Psychagôgoi*, perhaps written after his visit to Sicily.[14] Sophocles, who was not unacquainted with southern Italy either – witness his reference to the cult of Dionysos in Italy in the *Antigone* (1118–19)[15] – probably mentions the same oracle (F 748 Radt). It still seems to have inspired Vergil in his description of Aeneas' descent into the underworld in the famous book VI of the *Aeneid*.[16] The list suggests that consulting the dead at a specific oracle was not uncommon in the Greek world. Moreover, the presence of underworld rivers, such as the Styx and the Acheron, in the vicinity of several of these oracles shows that originally the location was closely connected with an entry into the underworld: clearly, the dead did not have far to travel.

Regarding the enquirers and their problems there are, unfortunately, only two cases about which we have a bit of information in the Archaic and Classical periods. Our first example is the Corinthian tyrant Periander who, having mislaid something that a friend had left in his charge, sent envoys to the Thesprotian oracle to inquire about its whereabouts. The ghost of his wife Melissa, whom he had murdered despite her being pregnant, appeared but said that she would not tell, since she was cold and naked: apparently Periander had not given her a proper burial."[17] In typical tyrant's fashion Periander then had all the women of the town assembled in the temple of Hera, where they were stripped naked and their clothes burnt.[18] The anecdote is related to illustrate the disgusting behaviour of tyrants, but it also shows us what kind of questions could be asked in the Archaic period. The second example concerns the Spartan king Pausanias, who at the beginning of the

fifth century enquired about a free-born girl, Kleonike, whom he had selected for a night of pleasure but murdered instead. When he saw her often in his dreams, he visited an oracle of the dead – the place is alternatively identified as Heraclea Pontica or Phigalia – where she appeared to him and advised him to return to Sparta where he died a violent death. In general, the fate of those who had died abroad seems to have been a regular item in the consultations of these oracles, but our information is too limited to make any sweeping sratement in this respect.[19] Consultation of the dead at a public oracle, then, was a perfectly respectable activity in Archaic and Classical Greece.

Almost none of these oracles has left any traces, but a series ofarchaeological campaigns has fortunately unearthed the impressive remains of the Thesprotian oracle, which in antiquity was so well known that some localised here the descent of Orpheus in his vain expedition to recover his wife Eurydice.[20] The material remains do not go back beyond the fourth century, but the oracle must have been older, since Herodotus reports its consultation by Periander during the Archaic period. And indeed, the crypt seems to have been built on the place of a former, older cave. No findings, though, are later than the second century BC, and it seems therefore reasonable to connect its destruction with Roman punititive measures after the battle of Pydna in 168 BC. Considering that the Romans abducted most of the Epirotes into slavery, it is understandable that no attempts were made to restore the oracle to its former function, and Pausanias speaks about it as a thing of the past *(9.30.6).*

The ancient building was situated on a thoroughly flattened hilltop. It measured *62 x 46* metres and its size must have looked massive to the travellers coming from afar. This appearance of inaccessibility will have prevented the idea that the dead could freely arise from the underworld to swarm over the land. Inside, a number ofcorridors with many doors must have impressed and intimidated the visitor. Given the absence of literary sources we can only speculate about the required preparations. It seems likely that candidates for consultation had to stay at the oracle for a while. Lucian's Menippos had to prepare for a period of *29* days, whereas in the oracle of Trophonius in Boeotian Lebadeia, the enquirer had first to spend a number of days in the oracle on a diet with much meat, but without hot baths (Paus. *9.39.5).*Strictly spoken, this oracle was not a *nekyomanteion,* but it came fairly close, since it furnishes the route to Lucian's Menippos for his return from the underworld to the upper world.?' The excavations at the Thesprotian oracle have brought to light many bones of cows, sheep, and pigs, which were probably meant for the living,'' but also the carbonised remains of barley, wheat, broad beans, lathyrus and, probably, hemp, which were clearly meant for the dead. The remains suggest that here, too, the enquirers had to stay a while at the oracle before being permitted to consult the dead.

Unfortunately we hardly know anything about the 'clergy' of the Tliesprotian oracle, but the building must have required quite a few people to be run in a proper manner. Some of them will have given the final permission

to the candidate and may have accompanied the enquirer up to the entry into the crypt. In the case of Odysseus, his comrades played the role of helpers, but in Phigaleia and Cumae, as we know from later times, there were officials called *psychagôgoi*, who also appear in the title of the drama of Aeschylus already mentioned.'' In the oracle of Trophonius, there were two boys, the so-called Hermai, who guided the enquirers, who changed into fine linen clothes and carried honey-cakes in their hands. The names refer to Hermes Psychopompos, the guide of the souls, a function which the god had acquired in the later Archaic period (Ch. 1.2).[24] In this capacity, the god also seems to have been worshipped in the Thesprotian oracle, since both at the beginning and the end of the actual corridor to the crypt the excavators found a heap of stones. As travellers in Greece often added stones to existing heaps in order to express their appreciation for the god's help, Hermes was probably imagined as extending his protecting hand to Thesprotian enquirers of the dead as well.''

The preparations and the pressing nature of the enquirers' problems must have put the enquirers into the right mood and the consultation could now finally begin. In the Thesprotian oracle there was a hole in the floor of a room in the middle of the building, which gave access to the crypt where the actual consultation took place. Pausanias (9.39.10) relates that in the oracle of Trophonius the candidate first had to descend via a light, narrow ladder before being 'drawn into a hole', and a ladder was probably also used in Thesprotia. Originally, caves may well have been the traditional place for a necromancy, since both in Cumae and in Lebadeia consultation took place in a cave, of which the darkness and dampness must have contributed to the general impressive atmosphere of the oracle.[26] But what happened once the enquirer was on his own in the cave?

The Church Father Clement of Alexandria (*Protr.* 2.1) exhorts the faithful as follows: 'Don't bother with godless temples or accesses to subterranean spaces full of magical tricks, such as the Thesprotian kettle.' The passage suggests that the personnel of the oracle used the sound of a kettle during the appearance of the dead or banged a kettle during the period of preparation to create a spooky atmosphere. However, in Thesprotia the priests did more than just banging a kettle. In the innermost chamber of the storage room, the excavators found a corroded heap of large iron wheels and several smaller bronze wheels, of which some were hook-toothed, such as might have been used in a crane worked by a windlass to prevent its running backwards. These were the means used in Greek theatres to make the gods appear on high. As the excavators also found jars with sulphur, it strongly looks as if the 'clergy' of the oracle produced apparitions in the crypt illuminated by sulphur. A study of 1980 comments: 'This is *late* Greek; and when priestcraft resorts to such (literally) brazen trickery, its society is surely "on the way out."''' Nothing is further from the truth in this judgement by a pair of scholars who apply modern notions of religious propriety to ancient Greece. The oracle, as we saw, dates back at least to the fourth century BC and nothing suggests that these

were late inventions. In Eleusis, too, a fire was probably produced at the end of the ritual, and everywhere the local 'clergy' may have produced apparitions via secret holes in the wall, as ancient magicians also sometimes did.[28] Inner sincerity was not a necessary qualification for proper religion in ancient Greece.

In addition to these public oracles we start to hear about private necromantic seances in the fifth century as well. Had they always been available for those who could not afford the journey to a proper oracle or did private necromancers appear only with the rise of a more private religion in the fifth century? Did Homer draw on private rituals in his depiction of Circe and Odysseus, just as Aeschylus did in his *Persians*? Tlie possibility cannot be completely excluded. but we have no indications for early private operators in our sources. The transition from public oracles to private necromancers may have been promoted by cases such as that of the Spartan king Pausanias. After he had been starved to death in the temple of Athena Chalcioecus, his shade kept pestering the Spartans. In order to appease him, they sent for *psychagôgoi* from Italy, surely those of the oracle at Cumae, who finally succeeded in drawing his shade away from the temple.[29] Can it be that some of these conjurers 'went private' after this event or that others were inspired by their example?

We simply do not know, but in the later fifth century private conjurors were clearly around. When, in Euripides' *Alcestis* (1127–S), Admetus wonders whether his veiled wife is not 'an apparition of the underworld', Heracles inclignantly answers that he is not in the business of necromancy.[30] In the *Birds* (1553–64), Aristophanes makes fun of Socrates by representing him as conjuring up spirits near a lake (probably Lake Avernus in Campania) and letting him sacrifice to that end a camel lamb. A most curious case can be found in Dodona, where from the sixth to the third century enquirers put their questions on very thin strips of lead, on one of which a group of people asks: 'should they really consult Dorios the *psychagôgos*.'[31] We would love to know what Dodona would have thought of the competition, but, as is usually the case, an answer has not survived. Plato abhorred all such private religious activities ancl in his *Laws* (10.909b) proposed solitary confinement for life for those who 'fool many of the living by pretending to raise the dead'.

2. Roman and Hellenistic necromancy

After Plato, our Greek sources are more or less silent about necromancy, but an upsurge in interest appears in tlie last century of the Roman republic. Originally, consulting the dead had been foreign to Roman culture, and it can not be a coincidence that we first hear of the practice when Roman society was under extreme pressure through proscriptions and civil wars. The poet Laberius put a mime *Necyomantia* on stage, the title of which clearly shows Greek influence." The fact that Varro thought it necessary to mention necromancy in his discussion of Numa's hydromancy shows that the practice

had already drawn his attention."[34] And indeed, Latin poetry of the second half of the first century BC abounds with references to necromancy.'" In this period it is normally ascribed to witches and magicians, but some dabblers in necromancy actually came from the highest Roman circles, such as Appius Claudius Pulcher and Vatinius.[35] In a short history of magic, the older Pliny rightly observes that it was not unknown to the early Romans, witness the Twelve Tables. He ascribes the origin of magic in general, and necromancy in particular, to the Persians: it was their magus Ostanes, an advisor to king Xerxes, who had imported magic into Greece.[36] The charge is clearly incorrect, but it well reflects the aversion of the large majority of the Roman upper class to magic practices.

Even less favourable was the first century of the Principate, when the emperor's feeling of uncertainty reflected itself in the condemnation of magic *tout court*. It is therefore remarkable that it is precisely in the literature of this century that we find an unprecedented concentration of elaborate scenes of necromancy, whereas earlier authors mostly had limited themselves to a few verses. The fashion was probably started by the Stoic philosopher Seneca, whose Teiresias calls up the shade of Laios in his *Oedipus* (530–658). The debt to Homer and Greek tragedy is clear, but at the same time Seneca derived from Virgil some of his setting and abstractions, such as Furor and Horror (590–1), both of whom appeared to Creon."[37] Homer and Vergil also served as examples for the necromancies in the Flavian epics of Valerius Flaccus, Silius Italicus and Statius, but they were all much more restrained in their descriptions than Seneca.[38]

The most interesting description from the point of view of the historian of magic is found in Lucan, another Stoic, whose *Catachthonion* has unfortunately been lost, but who in his *Pharsalia* (6.419–830) surpassed all others in the luridness of his scenes. He took his inspiration from a historical anecdote, which is related by Pliny (*NH* 7.178). During Sextus Pompeius' resistance against the forces of Caesar, his troops captured a Caesarian supporter, Gabienus. Sextus ordered him to be killed and he was taken away to the beach where his throat was slit. Yet he did not die immediately, but at the end of the day he told messengers of Sextus that he had been sent back from the underworld, *ab inferis*, to declare that the Pompeian cause was the just one.[39] Lucan transforms this scene in a picture of the worst possible witch, Erictho, who stands for everyrhing that was despised and feared by contemporary society. Among the corpses on the battlefield she searched for one whose lungs were still intact so that he was able to speak. Having found a suitable corpse she dragged it to her cave, opened it and filled it with hot blood. After the necessary spells the soldier finally revived and duly gave his prophecies. In the end, being drugged again, he obligingly climbed upon the pyre the witch had prepared for him.[40]

Unlike other authors, Lucan clearly knew something about magic as it was being practised, not just from literary models. For example, before Erictho

began tier long invocation of the infernal powers, 'she started to utter sounds tliat at first were confused and discordant, jarring and alien, weird, not like the speech of a human. Barking of dogs, wolfs howl, the dismal notes of the plaintive owls tliat mope by day and of those that screech in the nighttime' (6.686–9, tr. P. Widdows). The same use of animals we find in the magical papyri of Egypt, where a magician uses the sounds of birds (*PGM* XIII.139ff). Similarly, when Erictho's first invocation failed, she uttered rhreats to the Furies (750), threats that we also find in the magical papyri (*PGM* II.50–5, IV.1035–46). Finally, Erictho purportedly used the bodies ofchildren, young boys or criminals condemned to tlie gallows. It is precisely these categories, the *aôroi* and *biothanatoi*, which frequently recur in descriptions of magic, since the Greeks and Romans believed that they did not receive a proper place in the hereafter and therefore could be more easily called up.[41] It seems clear, then, that Lucan was well acquainted with proper magical texts.

How do we explain this concentration ofgruesome scenes of this particular moment of time? Richard Gordon has suggested that the reason for this development was tlie fact that in the iconography of the period the emperor was represented as virtually the sole sacrificer in public contexts. This monopoly of piety led to emergence of an enemy within, according to Gordon, 'whose pleasure lay in the perversion of sacrifice for unholy ends'."-' There may be an element of truth in this explanation, but, if so, only a small one, since it does not explain why exactly chis led to necromancy. In addition to the typically Stoic interest in divination,'" it seems more persuasive to think of the feelings of uncertainty that led many first-century emperors to put members of the upper-class to death. The morbid atmosphere of the time can hardly be separated from its morbid literature. Considering its materials, necromancy must have inevitably drawn attention as the worst feared form of magic. And indeed, we find it as a charge from emperors, such as Tiberius, againsr aristocrats, and from historians, such as Pliny and Suetonius, against emperors; later magnates were even accused of having first murdered their 'shady' mediums:'.'

Fortunately, the sand of Egypt has given us various examples of necromantic texts. The Egyptians enjoyed a great name in things magical,'" and as with the Persians (above), an important reason for their reputation will have been their being different. On the other hand, the Romans ruled Egypt since the death of Cleopatra and there is no reason that they would not have known of the flourishing market in magic in the country, as is shown by the literally hundreds of spells found on papyri. From the beginning of the Roman empire we start to find Egypt also connected with necromancy, although the practice is clearly older. Pliny (*NH* 30.18) menrions that in his time a famous teacher of grammar, Apion, the protagonist of Josephus' *Against Apion*, had called up shades in order to ask Homer for the name of his country and his parents. But the result was apparently not very encouraging, since Pliny stresses that Apion did not dare to publicise the answer. In a well-known Hermetic text, Thessalos, a name which strongly suggests magic (Ch. 3.3), goes to Egyptian

Thebes to consult Asclepius, where the priest asks him whether he wants to speak to a divinity or the soul of a dead person.[46] Apuleius also used this Egyptian reputation in his *Metamorphoses*. After a wife was accused of having murdered her husband but protested her innocence, the help was invoked of an Egyptian, Zatchlas (not, incidentally, an existing Egyptian name), who placed a herb on the mouth and the chest of the corpse. The dead husband immediately sat up, beseeched the necromancer to be left in peace and, after the necessary threats (above), indicted his wife."

Apuleius' passage suggests that necromancy was a popular subject in his time. This is confirmed by the fact that Lucian parodied the practice in his *Loves of Lies (15)*, where a rich youth wants to seduce the married woman Chrysis. So he hired a Hyperborean magician, who dug a pit at about midnight and not only summoned the deceased father, who of course first disapproved of the affair, but also Hecate together with Cerberus, and, moreover, brought the moon down. He then made a little Cupid from clay who flew away and fetched Chrysis. The whole affair cost the youth quite a fortune, although the lady, so Lucian makes clear, could have easily been had very cheaply.[48]

As the land of necromancers, Egypt still figures in two third-century novels, the one pagan and the other Christian.[19] In Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* (6.14–5), an old woman consulted a dead son about the fate of his vanished brother. After she had offered the usual libations of milk, honey, and wine, made a kind of voodoo doll and implored the moon, the corpse told his mother with a barely audible voice that she would not see her son again. Moreover, because of her magical practices she soon would die the violent death that is in store for all magicians. In the Christian *Recognitiones* (1.5), Clement mentions that he went to Egypt to consult a necromancing priest 'as if I wanted to inquire into some piece of business, but actually in order to find out whether the soul is immortal' – a nice Christian twist to his magical enterprise.

Unfortunately for us, Christians wrote much less about necromancy than one might have expected. After all, the Old Testament furnishes a splendid example in 1 *Samuel* 28, which relates that the first king of the Israelites, Saul, was facing the Philistines for a decisive battle. Having become extremely afraid about the outcome Saul tried to consult the Lord, but his dreams, oracles and prophets were of no avail. At his wits' end, he asked his servants for a medium, who was not easy to procure, since, as the text tells us, the king had removed all diviners and seers from his kingdom. However, apparently there was still one left, a woman in En Dor. Saul disguised himself by putting on different clothes and travelled in the night to her. Having sworn not to betray her, he asked her to evoke the shade of Samuel, the prophet who had made him king of Israel. When the shade of the old man appeared, the woman realised the true nature of the enquirer, but the king asked her to continue with her conjuring. After the 'witch' had succeeded, the old prophet foretold Saul the coming end of himself and his sons on the next day. And indeed, after their victory the Philistines hung the bodies of Saul and his sons on the walls of Beth

Shean, the later Scythopolis, one of the most splendid excavations of a classical site to be visited anywhere nowadays.

This text, which shows a number of similarities with the evocation of Darius in the *Persians*,[50] greatly intrigued the Church Fathers, who extensively commented on the passage. As they did not believe in the power of oracles,[51] nor in the appearance of shades, they explained in general the appearance of Samuel as a demon, a trick or simply denied that the prophet himself could have come up from the dead.[52] On the whole they therefore do not supply us with interesting details, but often repeat the pagan literary clichés.[53] For example, Pionius, a Christian martyr who was executed round AD 250 in Smyrna, explained the apparition of Samuel as a trick of demons from the underworld, that assumed the likeness of the prophet.[54]

Despite his unconvincing biblical exegesis, Pionius (*Mart.* Pion. 13.8) also produces a highly interesting piece of information. According to him, the Jews not only claimed that Christ was a human being and executed as a criminal, but they also claimed that Christ was evoked with the cross in a necromancy. Considering the representation of necromancers as people in search of bodies of criminals such as we find, for example, in Lucan, it was probably Christ's execution as a criminal that made this claim possible. At first sight one might be tend to consider Pionius' report as a typical case of religious slander, but in the Babylonian *Talmud* we find a story that a certain Onqelos, a nephew of the Emperor Titus, had evoked Jesus via necromancy;[55] in fact, several rabbis practised necromancy.[56] The publication in 1966 of a reconstructed Jewish handbook on magic, which probably dates to the early fourth century, but of which the magical material is clearly older, even provides detailed instructions for the questioning of a ghost and speaking with spirits.[57]

Apparently, in Smyrna the relations between Jews and Christians were tense. The report of the martyrdom of Polycarp (*Mart. Polyc.* 12.2, 13.1), the old Smyrnaean bishop who had been burned at the stake a century earlier, mentions that the Jews played a role in his persecution. Pionius (*Mart. Pion.* 13.1) also suggests that the Jews tried to profit from the Christian persecutions. It is highly unusual to find such an insight into the religious war of propaganda between Jews and Christians, which must have raged in more than one city during the first centuries of Christianity.

It remains extremely difficult to disentangle reality from representation in these reports, but Pliny's notice clearly shows that in Egypt in the beginning of the first century AD necromancy was apparently freely practised. Interest in necromancy was still very much alive in the third century. This is illustrated by the publication early last century of a papyrus from the conclusion of Book XVIII of Julius Africanus' *Kestoi* with the necromantic scene of the *Odyssey* (11.34–50), elaborated with a kind of magical hymn. According to the author, Homer or the Pisistratids had left out the hymn! As the hymn mentions not only Jaweh but also the ancient Egyptian gods Anubis, Phtah and Phre, the author evidently thought it necessary to 'update' Homer with contemporary

magical material in order to make the passage more interesting to his readers.[58]

In the fourth century there even was an industrious production of magical papyri – in fact, dozens of them are dated to that century – and in one of the most famous of them, a papyrus of the Bibliothèque Nationale, we find various spells connected with necromancy. To give an idea of the content of these spells, I will quote one with the title 'Spell of Attraction of King Pitys over any skull cup.[59] His prayer *of petition* to Helios':

> I call upon you, lord Helios, and your holy angels on this day, in this very hour: Preserve me, NN, for I am THENOR, and you are holy angels, guardians of the ARDIMALECHA. And ORORO MISREN NEPHO ADONAI AUEBOTHI ABATHARAI THOBEUA SOULMAI SOULMAITH ROUTREROUTEN OPHREOPHRI OLCHAMAOTH OUTE SOUTEATH MONTRO ELAT CHOUMIOI LATHOTH OTHETH, I beg you, lord Helios, hear me NN and grant me power over the spirit of this man who died a violent death, from whose tent I hold [this], so that I may keep him with me, NN, as helper and avenger for whatever business I crave from him.
>
> (*PGM* IV.1928–54, tr. E. N. O'Neil)

After this spell in which we easily recognise the usual piling up of divine names by which the magician shows his immense knowledge of the divine world, the papyrus also supplies various texts of enquiries which the magician can put to the skull, of which I will quote the shortest:

> Pitys the Thessalian's spell for questioning corpses: On a flax leaf write these things: AZEL BALEMACHO (12 letters).

Interestingly, there is also a prescription for the ink of the recipe:

> Ink: [Made) from red ochre, burnt myrrh, juice of fresh wormwood, evergreen, and flax. Write [on the leaf] and put it in the mouth [of the corpse).
>
> (*PGM* IV.2140–4, tr. W. C. Grese)

There are a few more necromantic spells, but our example already clearly shows the difference from the necromantic practices of the Archaic and Classical periods. Instead of being the object of the enquiry, the dead person has now become the medium for the questions. Curiously, none of these necromantic papyri is older than the fourth century, nor can we trace back the custom into ancient times, as the Egyptians did not practise necromancy before the coming of the Greeks and Romans.""

Admittedly, necromancy was indicted by various intellectuals under the

Empire, such as Artemidorus in his *Dreambook* (2.69), Philostratus in his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (8.7.12) and Porphyry in his On *Abstinence* (2.47.2), but these protests had little effect. Real changes took place only with the rise of Christianity. For a start, the Christians produced important changes in society regarding the most important mediums used in necromancy: people who had died a premature or violent death. In this respect the new Christian mentality greatly differed from traditional Greek and Roman ideas about these particular categories of the dead. Jesus' words to the criminal on the adjacent cross tliat he would be in Paradise (Appendix 2) on tliat very same day must have been an incredible statement for Greek and Roman newcomers to the Christian faith. Criminals had always been excluded from the hereafter or at the most occupied only a place at its periphery. However, given the early martyrdoms of Christians, such a doctrine could never have been acceptable to the new faith."'

Christianity produced a similar change in the valuation ofchildren who had died a premature death, as we can document not only from the content of epitaphs, which often mention prematurely deceased children. An analysis of nearly 55,000 funerary stones has demonstrated that the Christians celebrated their young dead to a much greater extent than their pagan contemporaries.[62] It may well be that this close sense of the family among the Christians was one of the main reasons for their success.

These ideological changes seem to have been concomitant with a kind of demonisation of necromancy. Fourth-century authors now suggest that the necromancers procured dead mediums by digging up corpses or even by committing infanticide."' Yet, all this was not as fatal as the imperial prohibitions. Whereas in 337 the pagan author Firmicus Maternus already mentioned necromancy negatively in his astrological handbook *Mathesis* (1.2.10). in 359 the Christian emperor Constantius II threatened his subjects with the worst possible penalties, if they practised necromancy, as we know from the historian Ammianus Marcellinus:

> For if anyone wore on his neck an amulet against the quartan ague or any other complaint, or was accused by the testimony of the evil-disposed of passing by a grave in the evening, on the ground tliat he was a dealer in poisons, or a gatherer of the horrors of the tombs and the vain illusions of the ghosts that walk there, he was condemned to capital punishment and so perished.[64]

It is attractive to connect this kind of witch-hunt with a feeling of uncertainty regarding the solidity of the emperor's rule. This also seems to have been the case with the emperor Valentian I. In 364, after the pagan interlude of Julian the Apostate, he ordered that any kind of religion authorised by his forefathers, such as the haruspices, was permitted. Capital punishment, on the other hand, awaited anyone who resorted 'at night to evil imprecations, magic

rituals or necromantic sacrifices'.[66] These imperial measures may not have been immediately effective. In fact, in Augustine's time necromancy still seems to have been an option in Africa; at the same time in Rome an amulet with a scene of necromancy could still be worn, and around AD *500* it still seems to have been practised at Beirut.[66] Eventually, though, the measures proved to be decisive. In fact, few magical texts survived into the Middle Ages, mostly only classical writings about magic. Necromancy now became the consultation of demonic powers rather than of the corpses of the dead.[67]

3. Modern **spiritualism**

We may bring out the features of ancient necromancy even sharper by comparing Greek practice with the last great surge in consultations of the dead, nineteenth-century spiritualism, 'our new-discovered, scientific necromancy', as it was called by an American opponent.[68] The movement began on 31 March 1848 in the village of Hydesville, near Rochester, New York, when three sisters, Leah, Kate and Margaretta Fox, claimed, almost certainly fraudulently, to have discovered an intelligent force behind the poltergeist that had disturbed their families. It would last a few years before the girls' mediumship was recognised, but already in 1852 the words 'spiritualist' and 'spiritualism' came into common usage,[69] and consulting spirits soon became the rage. As I am only interested here in its rituals in comparison with ancient necromancy, I will conclude with looking at the places where spirits were consulted, the organisation and audience of the seances, the mediums, the questions asked and, finally, the kind of afterlife the movement presupposed. Considering that the movement was extremely popular only just over a century and a half ago, one might have expected the availability of numerous 'thick descriptions', but this is not the case. Spiritualist seances are still curiously under-researched, as if the doubtful intellectual status of its practitioners could reflect on its modern researchers. It is an area in which much is still to be investigated.[70]

The first aspect of modern spiritualism that immediately strikes the student of ancient necromancy is its public character. Whereas Greek necromancy took place in isolation in specific but public places according to precise rituals, modern consultations of the dead were very much a communal affair. They could take place anywhere and there does not seem to have been any single kind of ritual. Spiritualists even insisted on the fact that they did not employ esoteric formulas or mysterious rites of initiation.[71] Meetings could take place in private rooms but also, as in the case of English working-class seances, in the Mechanics Institute or a Temperance Hall. In America things were done in a different mode. In addition to attending plain meetings in single rooms, one could even visit spirit concerts with trumpets, accordions and percussion instruments. The great variety in meeting places also shows the variety of the attending public, although the success of the spiritualistic

movement was not clie same in each country. Whereas it pervaded the whole of America and, if to a somewhat lesser extent, Great Britain, it never became very popular, for example, in the Netherlands. It is typical, though, of its popularity at clie time that spiritualists were invited to many of the European courts. The most successful medium ever, Daniel Dunglas Home (1833–86),[12] visited not only the Dutch Queen Sophia in The Hague and Emperor Napoleon III in Paris, but even Czar Alexander II in Moscow.[13]

The absence of initiations and formulas did not mean that seances could take place under any circumstances. The rooms in which they occurred always had to be dark, and it was considered co be to the great credit of Home that he allowed light in his seances, but even Home, as a Dutch observer noticed (below), performed better in small companies, preferably of women. As an example of a more secluded English seance in the, supposedly, 1830s we may quote an anonymous report from tlie 1870s, which probably, it seems to me, has retrojected current practices. According to the author there existed in London a lodge, appropriately called the Orpliic Circle, of which lie describes a seance as follows:

> The four lamps that sufficed to dispel the darkness of the lodge were lighted, the braziers duly served, and the fumigations carefully attended to. After the opening hymns had been sung and the invocacions commenced, the lamps began to flicker with tlie usual unsteady motion which indicates responses from the spirits summoned, and in a short time they [four lamps] went out after another, leaving the room only faintly illuminated by the colored fires from the braziers."

Clearly, such a solemn meeting was typically English. At the courts, the atmosphere had of course also to remain restrained. We are fortunate that for tlie very first time a Dutch dissertation has provided a report of Home's visit to the Dutch court, which until now had remained unpublished in a coded diary of a Dutch politician, Aeneas Mackay (1806–76). On 3 February 1858 Home let those present repeat tlie alphabet and each time the table would knock at the right letter: unlike in ancient Greece, modern spirits were of course already literate. The message for the queen was 'you are too sad', whicli cannoc have been very hard to say, since one of her friends had just died. The queen also felt four fingers pressing her hand, which she thought to be the hand of a very affectionate person, such as her husband, King William III, clearly was not. Mackay also relates that Home was chased away from the French court, because the empress Eugenie had felt upset after being touched by an invisible hand."[14] Americans, of course, would be less satisfied with a few movements or a decent touch, and during a seance in 1867 the audience could witness:

> bells ringing over the heads of the circle, floating in the air, and dropping upon the table; a spirit hand seen to extinguish the light;

> spirit hands touching the hands or garmenrs of all present; pocket books taken out of pockets, the money abstracted, and then returned; watches removed in the same manner . . . the bosoms of ladies partially unbuttoned, and articles thrust therein and taken therefrom; powerful rappings on the table and floor etc. etc.[76]

Of all the nineteenth-century spiritualist practitioners Home was by far the most famous medium. In addition to making contacts with spirits, he levitated tables, carried red-hot coal and elongated his body. In his most celebrated exhibition he even floated out of a window 70 feet above a London street while re-entering the building through another window seven and a half feet away – without ever being unmasked as an impostor. There were many other male mediums, but the majority were female, often adolescents, just as female adolescents have often been the favourite persons for apparitions, witness, amongst many others, Bernadette of Lourdes. This female prominence is a striking difference with the ancient world, where female mediumship was limited to only a few of the most important oracles, such as the Pythia of Delphi and the Sibyl of Erythrae.''

Both in the States and in Great Britain ordinary women eagerly grabbed the chance of a more exciting life, but they still had to conform to normal expectations. Whereas male mediums could move freely on the stage and employed what was called 'normal speaking', female mediums usually spoke in trance, i.e. others spoke through them, and they remained as passive as possible. Naturally, they also received less money for their performances, but they derived their satisfaction from the public acclaim, the possibility of enacting male roles and the possibilities of travelling – none of these advantages being available to their Greek counterparts.[78]

What kind of questions did the audience put to the mediums? Whereas in ancient Greece people apparently asked questions concerning the dead with whom they had a personal relationship (section 1), spiritualistic audiences and mediums cast their nets much wider. Of course, people asked for information about their departed beloved, including pets, but perhaps even more people were interested in what heaven looked like. On the other hand, interests were not only directed at the nature of the Other World. John Edmonds, a one-time judge at the New York Supreme Court received messages from Benjamin Franklin, who explained to a chorus of applauding spirits that his discoveries about electricity had made possible the communication with their still living relatives. Newton confessed to a mistake in his theory about gravity and Francis Bacon wrote a report on progress.[79] Once the gates to the hereafter were opened, there was no limit to the questions to be asked.

The very first communication concerning the world of the dead, that by the Fox sisters, was still supposed to have been from a murdered man: in other words, from a restless category of souls which traditionally was believed not to have definitively settled in the afterlife. It is remarkable how quickly this

changed. As a rule, spiritualists would receive messages from normally deceased persons. Moreover, they were now able to impart knowledge from the hereafter on a regular basis, whereas in previous times only those on the brink of death could report on the hereafter. After the flourishing of the afterlife in the High Middle Ages, belief in hell went into decline in the seventeenth century,[80] whereas heaven started to lose its significance in the eighteenth century.[81] For a short time, spiritualists managed to restore the afterlife to its former glory, if in a modernised form: without the torments of hell or ideas of praising God in heaven."[82] Modern dead continued their earthly life, and they were even able to develop themselves in the Otherworld. But the revival could not be sustained and the popularity of spiritualism had waned by the turn of the century.

For different reasons, then, the ancient world and the generations that preceded us devised means to contact the dead, be it their beloved or those they feared. It is one of the characteristics of modern life that the dead no longer are significant in our lives: typically, in Holland graves can be cleared away after only ten pears. The development is not universal, since in America belief in an afterlife has actually increased in the last two decades, and mediums are getting again popular. Yet people no longer seem to ask questions about the existence of an afterlife.[83] So, what about the 'life everlasting'? It is that question to which we now turn in our final chapter.